NEW TIMES

The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s

edited by
Stuart Hall
and
Martin Jacques

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Stuart Hall

The Meaning of New Times

How new are these ‘new times’? Are they the dawn of a New Age or only the whisper of an old one? What is ‘new’ about them? How do we assess their contradictory tendencies — are they progressive or regressive? These are some of the questions which the ambiguous discourse of ‘new times’ poses. They are worth asking, not because ‘new times’ represents a definitive set of answers to them or even a clear way of resolving the ambiguities inherent in the idea, but because they stimulate the Left to open a debate about how society is changing and to offer new descriptions and analyses of the social conditions it seeks to transcend and transform. If it succeeds in this, but accomplishes nothing else the metaphor of ‘new times’ will have done its work.

As the questions suggest, there is considerable ambiguity as to what the phrase ‘new times’ really means. It seems to be connected with the ascendancy of the New Right in Britain, the USA and some parts of Europe over the past decade. But what precisely is the connection? For example, are ‘new times’ a product of ‘the Thatcher Revolution’? Was Thatcherism really so decisive and fundamental? And, if so, does that mean that the Left has no alternative but to adapt to the changed terrain and agenda of politics, post-Thatcherism, if it is to survive? This is a very negative interpretation of ‘new times’: and it is easy to see why those who read ‘new times’ in this way regard the whole thing as a smokescreen for some seismic shift of gravity by the Left towards the Right.

There is, however, a different reading. This suggests that Thatcherism itself was, in part, produced by ‘new times’. On this interpretation, ‘new times’ refers to social, economic, political and cultural changes of a deeper kind now taking place in western capitalist societies. These changes, it is suggested, form
does, what exactly it is and how extensive it is, either within any single economy or across the advanced industrial economies of the West as a whole. Nevertheless, most commentators would agree that the term covers at least some of the following characteristics of change. A shift is taking place to new ‘information technologies’ from the chemical and electronic-based technologies which drove the ‘second’ industrial revolution from the turn of the century onwards — the one which signalled the advance of the American, German and Japanese economies to a leading position, and the relative ‘backwardness’ and incipient decline of the British economy. Secondly, there is a shift towards a more flexible specialised and decentralised form of labour process and work organisation, and, as a consequence, a decline of the old manufacturing base (and the regions and cultures associated with it) and the growth of the ‘sunrise’, computer-based, hi-tech industries and their regions. Thirdly, there is the hiving-off or a contracting-out of functions and services hitherto provided ‘in house’ on a corporate basis. Fourthly, there is a leading role for consumption, reflected in such things as greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the ‘targeting’ of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than by the Registrar General’s categories of social class.

Fifthly, there has been a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class and the corresponding rise of the service and white collar classes. In the domain of paid work itself, there is more flexi-time and part-time working, coupled with the ‘feminisation’ and ‘ethnicisation’ of the workforce. Seventhly, there is an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labour and their greater autonomy of nation state control. Eighthly, there is the ‘globalisation’ of the new financial markets. Finally, there is the emergence of new patterns of social divisions — especially those between ‘public’ and ‘private’ sectors and between the two-thirds who have rising expectations and the ‘new poor’ and underclasses of the one-third that is left behind on every significant dimension of social opportunity.

It is clear that ‘post-Fordism’, though having a significant reference to questions of economic organisation and structure, has a much broader social and cultural significance. Thus, for example, it also signals greater social fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities as well as the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption, as equally significant dimensions of the shift towards ‘post-Fordism’.

Some critics have suggested that ‘post-Fordism’ as a concept marks a return to the old, discredited base-superstructure or economic-determinist model according to which the economy determines everything and all other aspects can be ‘read off’ as simply reflecting that ‘base’. However, the metaphor of ‘post-Fordism’ does not necessarily carry any such implication. Indeed, it is modelled on Gramsci’s earlier use of the term, ‘Fordism’, at the turn of the century to connote a whole shift in capitalist civilization (which Gramsci certainly did not reduce to a mere phenomenon of the economic base). ‘Post-Fordism’ should also be read in a much broader way. Indeed, it could just as easily be taken in the opposite way — as signalling the constitutive role which social and cultural relations play in relation to any economic system. Post-Fordism as I understand it is not committed to any prior determining position for the economy. But it does insist — as all but the most extreme discourse theorists and culturalists must recognise — that shifts of this order in economic life must be taken seriously in any analysis of our present circumstances.

A recent writer on the subject of contemporary cultural change, Marshall Berman, notes that ‘modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology’ — not destroying them entirely, but weakening and subverting them, eroding the lines of continuity which hitherto stabilised our social identities.

The Return of the Subject

One boundary which ‘new times’ has certainly displaced is that between the ‘objective’ and subjective dimensions of change. This is the so-called ‘revolution of the subject’ aspect. The individual subject has become more important, as collective social subjects — like that of class or nation or ethnic group — become more segmented and ‘pluralised’. As social theorists
have become more concerned with how ideologies actually function, and how political mobilisation really takes place in complex societies, so they have been obliged to take the 'subject' of these processes more seriously. As Gramsci remarked about ideologies, 'To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is "psychological"' (Prison Notebooks p377). At the same time, our models of the 'subject' have altered. We can no longer conceive of 'the individual' in terms of a whole, centred, stable and completed Ego or autonomous, rational 'self'. The 'self' is conceptualised as more fragmented and incomplete, composed of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, 'produced', in process. The 'subject' is differently placed or positioned by different discourses and practices.

This is novel conceptual or theoretical terrain. But these vicissitudes of 'the subject' also have their own histories which are key episodes in the passage to 'new times'. They include the cultural revolution of the 1960s; '1968' itself, with its strong sense of politics as 'theatre' and its talk of 'will' and 'consciousness'; feminism, with its insistence that 'the personal is political'; the renewed interest in psychoanalysis, with its rediscovery of the unconscious roots of subjectivity; the theoretical revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s – semiotics, structuralism, 'post-structuralism' – with their concern for language, discourse and representation.

This 'return of the subjective' aspect suggests that we cannot settle for a language in which to describe 'new times' which respects the old distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of change. 'New times' are both 'out there', changing our conditions of life, and 'in here', working on us. In part, it is us who are being 're-made'. But such a conceptual shift presents particular problems for the Left. The conventional culture and discourses of the Left, with its stress on 'objective contradictions', 'impersonal structures' and processes that work 'behind men's (sic) backs', have disabled us from confronting the subjective dimension in politics in any very coherent way.

In part, the difficulty lies in the very words and concepts we use. For a long time, being a socialist was synonymous with the ability to translate everything into the language of 'structures'. But it is not only a question of language. In part, the difficulty...
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casualty of this process is the old idea of some homogeneous 'Third World'. Nowadays, Formosa and Taiwan are integrated into the advanced capitalist economies, as Hong Kong is with the new financial markets. Ethiopia or the Sudan or Bangladesh, on the other hand, belong to a different ‘world’ altogether. It is the new forms and dynamic of capital as a global force which is marking out these new divisions across the globe.

However, it seems to be the case that, whichever explanation we finally settle for, the really startling fact is that these new times clearly belong to a time-zone marked by the march of capital simultaneously across the globe and through the Maginot Lines of our subjectivities.

The title of Berman’s book All That is Solid Melts Into Air — a quotation from The Communist Manifesto — reminds us that Marx was one of the earliest people to grasp the revolutionary connection between capitalism and modernity. In the Manifesto, he spoke of the ‘constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ which distinguished ‘the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times’. ‘All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All That is Solid Melts Into Air’.

Indeed, as Berman points out, Marx considered the revolution of modern industry and production the necessary precondition for that Promethean or Romantic conception of the social individual which towers over his early writings, with its prospect of the many-sided development of human capacities. In this context, it was not the commodities which the bourgeoisie created which impressed Marx, so much as the processes, the powers, the expressions of human life and energy; men (sic) working, moving, cultivating, communicating, organising and reorganising nature and themselves. (Berman p93). Of course, Marx also understood the one-sided and distorted character of the modernity and type of modern individual produced by this development — how the forms of bourgeois appropriation destroyed the human possibilities it created. But he did not, on this count, refuse it. What he argued was that only socialism could complete the revolution of modernity which capitalism had initiated. As Berman puts it, he hoped ‘to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity’.

The brutalist or the functional in architecture and design. ‘Postmodernism’ also has a more philosophical aspect. Lyotard, Baudrillard and Derrida cite the erasure of a strong sense of history, the slippage of hitherto stable meanings, the proliferation of difference, and the end of what Lyotard calls the ‘grand narratives’ of progress, development, Enlightenment, Rationality, and Truth which, until recently, were the foundations of Western philosophy and politics.

Jameson, however, argues very persuasively that postmodernism is also ‘the new cultural logic of capital’ — ‘the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion into hitherto uncommodified areas’ (Jameson p78). His formulations remind us that the changing cultural dynamic we are trying to characterise is clearly connected with the revolutionary energy of modern capital — capital after what we used to call its ‘highest stages’ (Imperialism, Organised or Corporate capitalism), even later than ‘late capitalism’.

‘Post-industrialism’, ‘post-Fordism’, ‘Postmodernism’ are all different ways of trying to characterise or explain this dramatic, even brutal, resumption of the link between modernity and capitalism. Some theorists argue that, though Marx may have been wrong in his predictions about class as the motor of revolution, he was right — with a vengeance — about capital. Its ‘global’ expansion continues, with renewed energy in the 1980s, to transform everything in its wake, subordinating every society and social relationship to the law of commodification and exchange value. Others argue that, with the failures of the stalinist and social-democratic alternatives, and the transformations and upheavals now taking place throughout the communist world, capital has acquired a new lease of life.

Some economists argue that we are simply in the early, up-beat half of the new Kondratiev ‘long wave’ of capitalist expansion (after which the inevitable downturn or recession will follow). The American social critic whom we quoted earlier, Marshall Berman, relates ‘new times’ to ‘the ever-expanding drastically fluctuating capitalist world markets’ (Berman p16). Others, with their eye more firmly fixed on the limits and uneven development of capital on a global scale, emphasise more the ceaseless rhythm of the international division of labour, redistributing poverty and wealth, dependency and over-development in new ways across the face of the earth. One
Now here exactly is the rub about ‘new times’ for the Left. The ‘promise’ of modernity has become, at the end of the 20th century, considerably more ambiguous, its links with socialism and the Left much more tenuous. We have become more aware of the double-edged and problematic character of modernity: what Theodore Adorno called the ‘negative dialectic’ of enlightenment. Of course, to be ‘modern’ has always meant ‘to live a life of paradox and contradiction ... alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead (eg, the line from Nietzsche and Wagner to the death camps), longing to create and hold onto something real even as everything melts’.

Some theorists argue – the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas is one – that this is too pessimistic a reading of ‘Enlightenment’ and that the project of modernity is not yet completed. But it is difficult to deny that, at the end of the 20th century, the paradoxes of modernity seem even more extreme. ‘Modernity’ has acquired a relentlessly uneven and contradictory character: material abundance here, producing poverty and immiseration there; greater diversity and choice – but often at the cost of commodification, fragmentation and isolation. More opportunities for participation – but only at the expense of subordinating oneself to the laws of the market. Novelty and innovation – but driven by what often appear to be false needs. The rich ‘West’ – and the famine-stricken South. Forms of ‘development’ which destroy faster than they create. The city – privileged scenario of the modern experience for Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin – transformed into the anonymous city, the sprawling city, the inner city, the abandoned city...

These stark paradoxes project uncertainty into any secure judgement or assessment of the trends and tendencies of new times especially on the Left. Are new times to be welcomed for the new possibilities they open? Or rejected for the threat of horrendous disasters (the ecological ones are uppermost in our minds just now) and final closures which they bring in their wake? Terry Eagleton has recently posed the dilemma in comparable terms, when discussing the ‘true aporia, impasse or undecidability of a transitional epoch, struggling out as it is from beneath an increasingly clapped-out, discreditable, historically superannuated ideology of Autonomous Man, (first cousin to Socialist Man) with no very clear sense as yet of which path out from this pile of ruins is likely to lead us towards an enriched human life and which to the unthinkable terminus of some fashionable new irrationalist barbarism.’ (Eagleton p47). We seem, especially on the Left, permanently impaled on the horns of these extreme and irreconcilable alternatives.

It is imperative for the Left to get past this impossible impasse, these irreconcilable either/or's. There are few better (though many more fashionable) places to begin than with Gramsci’s ‘Americanism and Fordism’ essay, which is of seminal importance for this debate, even if it is also a strangely broken and ‘unfinished’ text. ‘Americanism and Fordism’ represented a very similar effort, much earlier in the century, to describe and assess the dangers and possibilities for the Left of the birth of that epoch – ‘Fordism’ – which we are just supposed to be leaving. Gramsci was conducting this exercise in very similar political circumstances for the Left – retreat and retreatment of the working-class movement, ascendancy of fascism, new surge of capital ‘with its intensified economic exploitation and authoritarian cultural expression’.

If we take our bearings from ‘Americanism and Fordism’ we are obliged to note that Gramsci’s ‘catalogue of ... most important or interesting problems’ relevant to deciding ‘whether Americanism can constitute a new historical epoch’ begins with ‘a new mechanism of accumulation and distribution of finance capital based directly on industrial production'. But his characterisation of ‘Fordism’ also includes a range of other social and cultural phenomena which are discussed in the essay: the rationalisation of the demographic composition of Europe; the balance between endogamous and exogamous change; the phenomenon of mass consumption and ‘high wages’; psychoanalysis and its enormous diffusion since the war; the increased ‘moral coercion’ exercised by the state; artistic and intellectual movements associated with ‘Modernism’; what Gramsci calls the contrast between ‘super-city’ and ‘super-country’; feminism, masculinism and ‘the question of sex’. Who, on the Left, now has the confidence to address the problems and promise of new times with a matching comprehensiveness and range? The sad fact is that a list of ‘new questions’ like that are most likely to engender a response of derision and sectarian back-biting at most meetings of the organised political Left today – coupled with the usual cries
of 'sell-out'!

This lack of intellectual boldness on the Left is certainly, in part, attributable to the fact that the contradictory forces associated with new times are just now, and have been for some time, firmly in the keeping and under the tutelage of the Right. The Right has imprinted them with the apparent inevitability of its own political project. However, as we argued earlier, this may have obscured the fact that what is going on is not the unrolling of a singular, unilinear logic in which the ascendancy of capital, the hegemony of the New Right and the march of commodification are indissolubly locked together. These may be different processes, with different time-scales, which the dominance of the Right in the 1980s has somehow rendered natural and inevitable.

One of the lessons of new times is that history does not consist of what Benedict Anderson calls ‘empty, homogeneous time’, but of processes with different time-scales and trajectories. They may be convened in the same conjuncture. But historic conjunctures of this kind remain complex, not simple: not in any simple sense ‘determined’ but over-determined (that is, the result of a fusion or merging of different processes and contradictions which nevertheless retain their own effectivity, ‘the specific modalities of their actions’ — (Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Over-determination’). That is really what a ‘new conjuncture’ means, as Gramsci clearly showed. The histories and time-scales of Thatcherism and of new times have certainly overlapped. Nevertheless, they may belong to different temporalities. Political time, the time of regimes and elections, is short: ‘a week is a long time in politics’. Economic time, sociological time, so to speak, has a longer durée. Cultural time is even slower, more glacial. This does not detract from the significance of Thatcherism and the scale of its political intervention, about which we have been writing. There is nothing slow, glacial or ‘passive’ about the Thatcherite revolution, which seems by contrast brutally abrupt, concise and condensed.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the longer durée of new times, Thatcherism’s project can be understood as operating on the ground of longer, deeper, more profound movements of change which appear to be going its way, but of which, in reality, it has been only occasionally, and fleetingly, in command over the past decade. We can see Thatcherism as, in fact, an attempt to hegemonise these deeper tendencies within its project of ‘regressive modernisation’, to appropriate them to a reactionary political agenda and to harness to them the interests and fortunes of specific and limited social interests. Once we have opened up this gap, analytically, between Thatcherism and new times, it may become possible to resume or re-stage the broken dialogue between socialism and modernity.

Consider another question with which people on the Left perpetually tease and puzzle one another: what kind of ‘transition’ are we talking about and how total or how complete is it? This way of posing the question implies an all-or-nothing answer. Either it is a New Epoch, or nothing at all has changed. But that is not the only alternative. We are certainly not debating an epochal shift, of the order of the famous transition from feudalism to capitalism. But we have had other transitions from one regime of accumulation to another, within capitalism, whose impact has been extraordinarily wide ranging. Think, for example, of the transition which Marx writes about between absolute and relative surplus value; or from machinofacture to ‘modern industry’; or the one which preoccupied Lenin and others at the turn of the century and about which Gramsci was writing in ‘Americanism and Fordism’. The transition which new times references is of the latter order of things.

As to how complete it is: this stand-and-deliver way of assessing things may itself be the product of an earlier type of totalising logic which is beginning to be superseded. In a permanently Transitional Age we must expect unevenness, contradictory outcomes, disjunctures, delays, contingencies, uncompleted projects overlapping emergent ones. We know that Marx’s Capital stands at the beginning, not the completion, of the expansion of the capitalist ‘world market’; and that earlier transitions (such as that from household to factory production) all turned out, on inspection, to be more protracted and incomplete than the theory suggested.

We have to make assessments, not from the completed base, but from the ‘leading edge’ of change. The food industry, which has just arrived at the point where it can guarantee worldwide the standardisation of the size, shape and composition of every hamburger and every potato (sic) chip in a Macdonald’s Big Mac from Tokyo to Harare, is clearly just entering its ‘Fordist’ apogee. However, its labour force and highly mobile, ‘flexible’
and deskill work patterns approximate more to some post-Fordist patterns. Motor cars, from which the Age of Fordism derived its name, with its multiple variations on every model and market specialisation (like the fashion and software industries) is, in some areas at least, on the move towards a more post-Fordist form. The question should always be, where is the ‘leading edge’ and in what direction is it pointing.

The Cultural Dimension

Another major requirement for trying to think through the complexities and ambiguities of new times is simply to open our minds to the deeply cultural character of the revolution of our times. If ‘post-Fordism’ exists, then it is as much a description of cultural as of economic change. Indeed, that distinction is now quite useless. Culture has ceased (if ever it was – which I doubt) to be a decorative addendum to the ‘hard world’ of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world. The word is now as ‘material’ as the world. Through design, technology and styling, ‘aesthetics’ has already penetrated the world of modern production. Through marketing, layout and style, the ‘image’ provides the mode of representation and fictional narrativisation of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends. Modern culture is relentlessly material in its practices and modes of production. And the material world of commodities and technologies is profoundly cultural. Young people, black and white, who can’t even spell ‘postmodernism’ but have grown up in the age of computer technology, rock-video and electronic music, already inhabit such a universe in their heads.

Is this merely the culture of commodified consumption? Are these necessarily Trivial Pursuits? (Or, to bring it right home, a trendy ‘designer addiction’ to the detritus of capitalism which serious Left magazines like Marxism Today should renounce – or even better denounce – forever?) Yes, much – perhaps, even most – of the time. But underlying that, have we missed the opening up of the individual to the transforming rhythms and forces of modern material life? Have we become bewitched by who, in the short run, reaps the profit from these transactions (there are vast amounts of it being made), and missed the democratisation of culture which is also potentially part of their hidden agenda? Can a socialism of the 21st century revive, or
This shift of time and activity towards 'civil society' has implications for our thinking about the individual's rights and responsibilities, about new forms of citizenship and about ways of ordering and regulating society other than through the all-encompassing state. They imply a 'socialism' committed to, rather than scared of, diversity and difference.

Of course, 'civil society' is no ideal realm of pure freedom. Its micro-worlds include the multiplication of points of power and conflict - and thus exploitation, oppression and marginalisation. More and more of our everyday lives are caught up in these forms of power, and their lines of intersection. Far from there being no resistance to the system, there has been a proliferation of new points of antagonism: new social movements of resistance organised around them - and, consequently, a generalisation of 'politics' to spheres which hitherto the Left assumed to be apolitical: a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body. What we lack is any overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances. Perhaps there isn't, in that sense, one 'power game' at all, more a network of strategies and powers and their articulations - and thus a politics which is always positional...

One of these critical 'new' sites of politics is the arena of social reproduction. On the Left, we know about the reproduction of labour power. But what do we really know - outside of feminism - about ideological, cultural, sexual reproduction? One of the characteristics of this area of 'reproduction' is that it is both material and symbolic, since we are reproducing not only the cells of the body but also the categories of the culture. Even consumption, in some ways the privileged terrain of reproduction, is no less symbolic for being material. We need not go so far as Baudrillard (p62), as to say 'the object is nothing' in order to recognize that, in the modern world, objects are also signs, and we relate to the world of things in both an instrumental and a symbolic mode. In a world tyrannised by scarcity, men and women nevertheless express in their practical lives not only what they need for material existence but some sense of their symbolic place in the world, of who they are, of their identities. One should not miss this drive to take part or 'come on' in the theatre of the social - even if, as things stand, the only stage provided is within what the Situationists, in 1968, used to call the 'fetishised spectacle of the commodity'.

Of course, the preoccupation with consumption and style may appear trivial - though more so to men, who tend to have themselves 'reproduced', so to say, at arms length from the grubby processes of shopping and buying and getting and spending and therefore take it less seriously than women, for whom it was destiny, life's 'work'. But the fact is that greater and greater numbers of people (men and women) - with however little money - play the game of using things to signify who they are. Everybody, including people in very poor societies whom we in the West frequently speak about as if they inhabit a world outside of culture, knows that today's 'goods' double up as social signs and produce meanings as well as energy. There is no clear evidence that, in an alternative socialist economy, our propensity to 'code' things according to systems of meaning, which is an essential feature of our sociality, would necessarily cease - or, indeed, should.

A socialism built on any simple notion of a 'return to Nature' is finished. We are all irrevocably in the 'secondary universes' where Culture predominates over Nature. And culture, increasingly, distances us from invoking the simple, transparent ground of 'material interests' as a way of settling any argument. The environmental crisis, which is a result of the profound imbalance between Nature and Culture induced by the relentless drive to subordinate everything to the drive for profitability and capital accumulation cannot be resolved by any simple 'return' to Nature. It can only be resolved by a more human - that is, socially responsible and communally responsive - way of cultivating the natural world of finite resources on which we all now depend. The notion that 'the market' can resolve such questions is patently - in the light of present experience - absurd and untenable.

This recognition of the expanded cultural and subjective ground on which any socialism of the 21st century must stand, relates, in a significant way, to feminism, or better still, what we might call 'the feminisation of the social'. We should distinguish this from the simplistic version of 'the future is female', espoused by some tendencies within the women's movement, but recently subject to Lynne Segal's persuasive critique. It arises from the remarkable - and irreversible - transformation in the position of women in modern life as a consequence not only of
shifts in conceptions of work and exploitation, the gendered recomposition of the workforce and the greater control over fertility and reproduction, but also the rebirth of modern feminism itself.

Feminism and the social movements around sexual politics have thus had an unsettling effect on everything once thought of as 'settled' in the theoretical universe of the Left. And nowhere more dramatically than in their power to de-centre the characteristic conversations of the Left by bringing on to the political agenda the question of sexuality. This is more than simply the question of the Left being 'nice' to women or lesbians or gay men or beginning to address their forms of oppression and exclusion. It has to do with the revolution in thinking which follows in the wake of the recognition that all social practices and forms of domination — including the politics of the Left — are always inscribed in and to some extent secured by sexual identity and positioning. If we don't attend to how gendered identities are formed and transformed and how they are deployed politically, we simply do not have a language of sufficient explanatory power at our command with which to understand the institutionalisation of power in our society and the secret sources of our resistances to change. After another of those meetings of the Left where the question of sexuality has cut through like an electric current which nobody knows how to plug into, one is tempted to say especially the resistances to change on the Left.

Thatcherism was certainly fully aware of this implication of gender and identity in politics. It has powerfully organised itself around particular forms of patriarchy and cultural or national identity. Its defence of 'Englishness', of that way of 'being British' or of the English feeling 'Great again', is a key to some of the unexpected sources of Thatcherism's popularity. Cultural racism has been one of its most powerful, enduring, effective — and least remarked — sources of strength. For that very reason, 'Englishness', as a privileged and restrictive cultural identity, is becoming a site of contestation for those many marginalised ethnic and racial groups in the society who feel excluded by it and who hold to a different form of racial and ethnic identification and insist on cultural diversity as a goal of society in new times.

The Left should not be afraid of this surprising return of ethnicity. Though ethnicity continues to be, in many places, a surprisingly resilient and powerfully reactionary force, the new forms of ethnicity are articulated, politically, in a different direction. By 'ethnicity' we mean the astonishing return to the political agenda of all those points of attachment which give the individual some sense of 'place' and position in the world. Whether these be in relation to particular communities, localities, territories, languages, religions or cultures. These days, black writers and film-makers refuse to be restricted to only addressing black subjects. But they insist that others recognise that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power. Because these positions change and alter, there is always an engagement with politics as a 'war of position'.

This insistence on 'positioning' provides people with co-ordinates, which are specially important in face of the enormous globalization and transnational character of many of the processes which now shape their lives. The new times seem to have gone 'global' and 'local' at the same moment. And the question of ethnicity reminds us that everybody comes from some place — even if it is only an 'imagined community' — and needs some sense of identification and belonging. A politics which neglects that moment of identity and identification — without, of course, thinking of it as something permanent, fixed or essential — is not likely to be able to command the new times.

Could there be new times without new subjects? Could the world be transformed while its subjects stay exactly the same? Have the forces remaking the modern world left the subjects of that process untouched? Is change possible while we remain untransformed? It was always unlikely and is certainly an untenable proposition now. This is another one of those many 'fixed and fast-frozen relationships, venerable ideas and opinions' which, as Marx accurately predicted, new times are quietly melting into thin air.